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Opinion: the case for free universal childcare in Australia

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Opinion: the case for free universal childcare in Australia

Abstract

Many countries, such as the UK, are providing free universal childcare for children aged 3 and up. They have done so because they recognise that improving child development for the whole population will be important for future economic development. Should Australia follow their lead?

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By: Edward Melhuish in Industry, News, Opinion October 15, 2015 0

Many countries, such as the UK, are providing free universal childcare for children aged 3 and up. They have done so because they recognise that improving child development for the whole population will be important for future economic development. Should Australia follow their lead?

Why should the state pay for childcare? As a mother recently said: "If you can't pay for childcare yourself, then wait until you can. Why should the country pay? No-one paid for me." While this is a common view in Australia, we never hear the same argument made against state-funded schooling.

There is a false distinction between childcare and education. While childcare policies are in part about looking after children to enable parents to work, they should also be about the wellbeing of children. However, the recent Australian Productivity Commission report implies that only employment issues matter.

In many countries, particularly in northern Europe, governments such as the UK's have changed their views on childcare to embrace improving long-term child wellbeing by providing high-quality childcare for children 3 years and up. This has been UK policy since 2004, when the government, driven by evidence of the value of early education, radically changed tack.

A Labour government introduced 15 hours of free nursery to all children from their 3 birthday. Fifteen hours was found to be most effective for improving child development for the general population, although children from disadvantaged families can benefit from more hours. A Conservative-led government extended this to 2-year-olds for the 40% of families deemed most disadvantaged, because politicians of all hues have been convinced by the growing evidence of the impact of nursery care on a

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child's life chances.

Beneficial effects are present for all children according to longitudinal research of 4000 youths in England and Northern Ireland, as well as research in other countries. Attending high-quality preschool from the age of 2 upwards can boost a range of outcomes, including educational and social development, and this is apparent from the start right through to adulthood.

Even once a child goes to primary school, the difference preschool makes is apparent. As one teacher I spoke to put it: "Some children arrive at reception class having spent far too much time confined to home, glued to the television, and nurseries help prepare children for school."

While the extensive international evidence indicates that the benefits are greatest for the disadvantaged, it is clear that children from all sections of society benefit. We can see evidence similar to that from the UK in Denmark, the Netherlands, France, Germany, Norway and Switzerland.

James Heckman, a Nobel prize-winning economist says: "Like it or not, the most important mental and behavioural patterns, once established, are difficult to change once children enter school."

It would be foolish to reject the evidence. However, this does not mean "formal" education should begin earlier, rather, there should be state funding for play-based, nursery settings from the age of 2, followed by a gentle transition into school.

Across northern Europe, this is an issue on which politicians of left, centre and right agree. In the UK, the new Conservative government has announced that the current 15 hours of free nursery provision is to be increased to 30 hours, largely to further boost women's employment, and they are supported by Labour. The Liberal/Democrats want to go further and provide universal care for 2-year-olds and, for the first time, to cover toddlers, from nine months to 2 years, if their parents are working.

The reasons are only partly driven by the benefits of early education. It is also about helping parents work, because the costs of childcare can be too much to bear for many families.

This, of course, does not automatically justify state funding, but a powerful economic case can be made. State funding of childcare can help parents into work and this is not necessarily a drain on the treasury; rather it can lead to more revenue. A UK think tank has published a report suggesting that a 5 per cent increase in maternal employment in the UK could be worth £750m annually in increased tax revenue and reduced benefit spending.

In summary the evidence clearly indicates that a stable, high-quality early childhood education and care system should be regarded as part of the infrastructure for a country's long-term economic and social development, to be developed in much the same way as the education system or roads. Such perspectives are increasingly prevalent in the developed countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

The OECD report *Starting Strong III* begins: "A growing body of research recognises that early childhood education and care (ECEC) brings a wide range of benefits; for example, better child wellbeing and learning outcomes as a foundation for lifelong learning, more equitable child outcomes and reduction of poverty, increased intergenerational social mobility, more female labour market participation, increased fertility rates, and better social and economic development for the society at large."

Countries that are actively planning for long-term economic growth are investing in early childhood learning, because the jobs of the future will require high skills, and the foundations are laid early in life. An example is the investment that China has made in preschool education, as it is seen as a step on the road to becoming an economic super-power of the future. Additionally, increased parental participation in the workforce raises the productivity of the nation right now. A European Union report advises that "member states should remove disincentives to female labour force participation ... [and] provide childcare to at least 90 per cent of children between 3 years old and mandatory school age and at least 33 per cent of children under 3 years of age".

How should Australia choose? There are plenty of options. Should Australia choose to foster child development and increase the skills of the whole population for longer-term economic development? Or should it drift from year to year driven by short-term concerns?

Professor Edward Melhuish is a leading scholar and adviser to the OECD, European Commission and World Health Organization on childhood development issues. He will share his research at the Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth Conference in Melbourne tomorrow.

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